



1999 Session Report

Rep. Ruth Fisher

27th District Newsletter

Autumn 1999

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Dear Friends,

Lawmakers met in Olympia for 108 days, including a very brief, 3-day special session.

Control of the House of Representatives is evenly-split: Democrats and Republicans each have 49 seats. This tie slowed down the law-making process, which prevented us from approving several new laws, and from considering long-term solutions to difficult issues.

I am generally pleased with the progress that was made for our state this year. We passed a fair, reasonable, and responsible operating budget that makes public schools our top priority. We approved a \$4 billion transportation budget that keeps our economy moving and takes major steps to resolve traffic congestion. We also took advantage of available federal funds to provide basic health care insurance to thousands of children of working parents.

This newsletter gives a brief report on the recent legislative sessions. I hope you find this newsletter useful and informative. As always, I welcome your thoughts and comments.

Sincerely,

Ruth Fisher

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State Budget

Approving a two-year operating budget is the major responsibility for the Legislature. This year, this task proved to be difficult and politically divisive. On the last day of the regular session, three House Republicans joined 49 Democrats in approving a \$20.6 billion operating budget. This spending plan lives up to our responsibilities to provide adequate services to the people of our state, while also living within our means. It is a true education budget that fulfills our promise to make public education our #1 priority. It also makes strong investments in:

- Skills needed for good jobs in the new Washington economy
- Attracting and keeping bright school teachers
- Affordable health care for working families and the elderly
- Restoring threatened salmon populations

- College opportunities for students of all ages
- Better long-term care for seniors
- Keeping all of our state parks open, clean and safe
- Maintaining Public Safety

Strong Schools

Despite the Washington Constitution's bold declaration that education is the state's "paramount duty," our public schools have been short-changed for the past few years. Classrooms have become more crowded, inflation has eroded teacher pay, and homeowners are picking up a larger share of school construction costs. This year, Democrats set out to change direction and re-position our schools for the 21st century. Indeed, legislators tackled an impressive array of education initiatives in 1999.

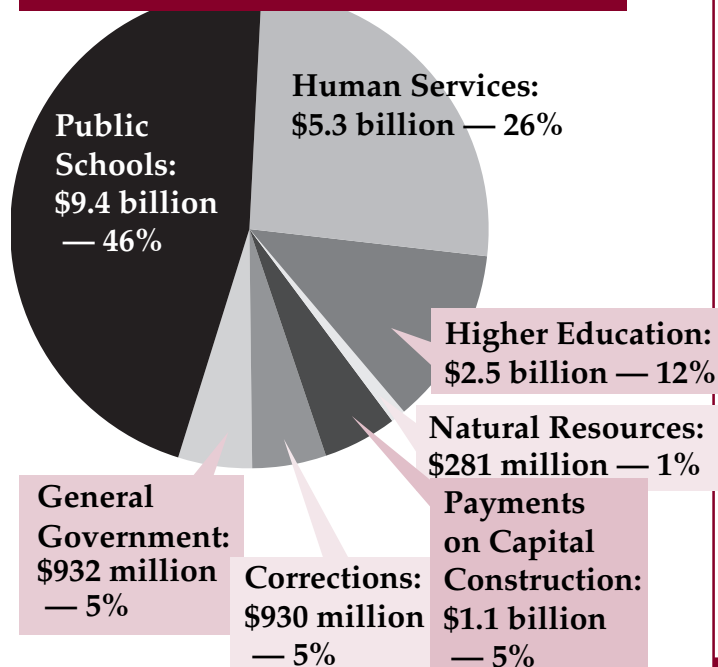
We awarded teachers long-overdue pay raises of 8-15% so that we can retain and attract the best and brightest to the teaching profession. Lawmakers also approved \$7 million to improve school safety. These funds can be used to hire security officers, to create alternative school programs for disruptive

students, and to establish school-safety and response plans. Further, lawmakers kept education reform efforts on track by setting up new accountability measures to make sure schools are meeting higher academic standards, and giving poor-performing schools the help they need to succeed.

Better Health Care for Working Families

Money can't buy health. But it can buy health care and health care coverage, which families need for peace of mind, to avoid financial struggles, and to maintain their quality of life. Legislation that is now law will provide 10,000 Washington children with basic health insurance. This measure takes advantage of a 2-for-1 federal match that uses tobacco tax money to insure children of low-income working parents. Although Washington was the last state in the nation to participate in this program, at last these children will receive the vaccinations and other routine medical care they need. In addition, lawmakers took steps to bolster participation in the state's Basic Health Plan by making premiums affordable for working adults. This program provides subsidized health care to working people on a sliding-fee scale. Despite these major achievements, I am disappointed that lawmakers failed to approve a Patients' Bill of Rights. I believe consumers deserve more from their health-insurance dollars.

1999-'01 Budget: \$20.6 Billion



Higher Education

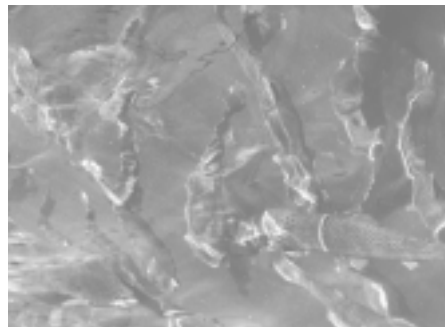
Higher education in our state is at a crossroads heading into the 21st century. Fortunately, the University of Washington-Tacoma campus is poised to prepare today's students for tomorrow's economic realities. Lawmakers approved \$36.4 million to pay for Phase 2 construction at UW-T, including construction of the West Coast Grocery and Dougan Buildings, new Science and classroom buildings, and a 600-vehicle parking lot. Lawmakers also re-authorized \$19.35 million from the previous biennium to complete Phase 1 construction and renovation projects. Also during the next two years, Tacoma Community College will receive over \$5 million to renovate the Art Classrooms building and to make numerous repairs to other buildings.

On the operating side, the Legislature authorized an increase in enrollment at the UW-Tacoma campus by nearly 33 percent over the next two years. Enrollment at TCC will increase by 100 students. Statewide, we approved funding for 8,300 additional college opportunities and \$30 million in financial aid to help students afford a college education. This includes 4,200 Promise Scholarships for high-achieving, middle-class graduating seniors to attend college in Washington. Applications for these scholarships have already been mailed to high school principals.



State Parks

Washington parks rank fourth in the nation for park use during the day and seventh for overnight use. But, we have fallen behind on state funding for our parks during the past few years. Lawmakers took action this year to reverse this funding trend, to keep all of our state parks open, clean and safe. The budget includes \$10 million for park operation, including repairs, ranger and camper safety, and no reliance on day use fees.



Salmon Restoration

Earlier this year, seven species of Northwest salmon and steelhead were added to the threatened or endangered lists under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), bringing the total to 16 ESA-listed fish runs in Washington. Virtually every part of the state is affected as a result of the listings, and so is any activity that can conceivably harm salmon or their habitat. With the

energy and dedication of Rep. Debbie Regala, the Legislature stepped up to this unprecedented environmental challenge by including nearly \$200 million in state and federal money in the budget to pay for salmon recovery, water quality projects, and fish and wildlife enforcement.



Transportation

Growing traffic congestion means we spend more time in our cars and less time with our families and friends. And, it means decreased productivity. Our transportation network is the circulation system for our economy. When traffic backs up, not only does our frustration grow, but our economic prosperity and personal standard of living suffers.

Resolving our current transportation crisis and planning for future capacity has been at the forefront of the political arena for the past few years. Unfortunately, partisan politics has played a divisive role during this time. As Co-chair of the House Transportation Committee this year, I attempted to bring all sides of the transportation debate together again to decide how best to allocate our available resources.

Although it is the task of the committee co-chairs to set state transportation policy, all members of the House Transportation

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Committee helped to write the 1999-01 transportation budget, which spends \$4 billion over the next two years. This plan combines current transportation revenue, voter-approved Referendum 49 funds, and federal highway dollars into one pool of money to tackle a portion of our state's transportation needs. Two of my transportation priorities this year were improving freight mobility and providing cities and counties with adequate funds to keep up with increased demand and wear-and-tear on local streets and roads. We succeeded on both counts and many more.

Despite these accomplishments, I felt the Legislature came up short in a couple areas. First, lawmakers still lack a long-term focus on regional transportation issues. While we're tackling numerous construction projects, it's important to keep in mind that R-49 only funded 15 percent of our transportation needs. I am a member of the Blue Ribbon Commission charged with determining long-term transportation solutions and strategies. Second, the two-year transportation plan fails to make transit a major priority. With limited space and a commitment to maintaining a high

quality of life, it is impossible to solve every transportation problem by pouring more and more concrete. We've got to do a better job of getting single drivers out of their cars.

Here is how our statewide priorities are funded during the next two years:

- State Highways: \$1.23 billion
- State Ferries: \$589 million
- Local Government: \$196 million
- Rail: \$126 million
- Freight Mobility: \$85 million
- Rural Economic Development: \$69.8 million

Local Spotlight: Pierce County Transportation Projects Funded

- Interstate 5:
HOV Lane Construction (\$36.8 million)
Repare Gravelly Lake Drive to Puyallup River Bridge (\$3.9 million)
- *(Gov. Locke vetoed funding for HOV lanes on Hwy 16 -- \$3.9 million)*
- Rail/Road Separation at Pt of Tacoma Rd & SR 509 (\$2.5 million)
- Bridge Rehabilitation (\$777,000)
- SR 512 Safety Improvements (\$325,000)

In addition, Pierce County and local cities were allocated additional discretionary funds to fix potholes, improve intersections, or other safety features:

- Pierce County (\$1.6 million)
- Tacoma (\$2.2 million)
- Fife (\$62,000)
- Puyallup (\$361,000)
- Fircrest (\$71,000)

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